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# “Double Consciousness” and the Racial Self in Zitkala-Ša’s *American Indian Stories*

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in U.S. Ethnic Studies. She conducted this research in the summer of 2009 after receiving the Adrian Tinsley Program Research Grant. She worked under the mentorship of Dr. Benjamin Carson. This piece is a section of the final paper.

In 1903, the African American intellectual and political figure W. E. B. Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, introduced the concept of double consciousness. Du Bois defines double consciousness as the struggle African Americans face to remain true to black culture while at the same time conforming to the dominant white society. Du Bois writes, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness...one ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois 2). Over one hundred years later, double consciousness is no longer limited to the lives of African Americans. Various ethnic Americans experience this split in consciousness while attempting to merge their specific cultural heritages with the values of dominant white society. By providing a representation of society through its characters and their interactions with the world around them, literature has been an important tool in the exploration of double consciousness. *Zitkala-Ša’s American Indian Stories* depicts the Native American experience with double consciousness. This essay explores the ways in which *American Indian Stories* displays the shift in race-thinking that has taken place over the past 100 years.

In order to illuminate the presence of double consciousness in *American Indian Stories*, a clear understanding of the theory of double consciousness is necessary. Du Bois scholar Rutledge Dennis breaks double consciousness down into three main components. He first argues “that the American world ‘yields’ to blacks no true-self consciousness” (Stone and Dennis 16). This holds America accountable for African Americans’ clouded perception of themselves. The second component, Dennis argues, is “that blacks always see themselves through the eyes of others” (16). African Americans are torn between the way they see themselves and the way they are seen by others. Their identities become fragmented as a result of this struggle. The third component is, according to Dennis, that “there exists an eternal and unreconciled two-ness (two thoughts, two souls, two warring ideals) within the collective black population” (16). By conforming to the expectations of whites, African Americans split themselves into two different selves.

A number of important scholars have used double consciousness as a model from which to build their own theories of racial identity. In *Against Race*, Paul Gilroy uses W.E.B. Du Bois’ original proposition of double consciousness to urge individuals to abandon race-thinking all together. He argues, “The

modern times that W.E.B. Du Bois once identified as the century of the color line have now passed” (1). Gilroy reflects on the shift in race-thinking that has occurred over time. Gilroy’s *Against Race* “considers patterns of conflict connected to the consolidation (increasing of strength) of *culture lines* rather than color lines and is concerned, in particular, with the operations of power, which, thanks to ideas about ‘race,’ have become entangled with those vain and mistaken attempts to delineate and subdivide humankind” (1). Although I will not be arguing for the abandonment of race-thinking all together, I will be exploring the shift in race-thinking that Gilroy proposes.

Like Paul Gilroy, feminist scholar Linda Alcoff recognizes the changes in the color-line and the obsolescence of thinking in terms of strictly “black” and “white.” Alcoff states, “If W.E.B. Du Bois were alive today, he would probably tell us that the problem of the twenty-first century will prove to be the lines between communities of color, or the questions of cross-ethnic relations. Coalitions across these communities are as critically important today as they are difficult to maintain” (247). Alcoff uses the “belief that the formation of identity does not fit into the two separate categories that ‘double consciousness’ proposes” as a central focus of her examination in *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (42). She stresses the importance of understanding the ways in which the interpretation of race will differ across generations and political communities. In her discussion of the black/white binary, Alcoff criticizes those who define race exclusively based on color, “as if color alone determines racial identity and is the sole object of racism” (256). This leaves racial and ethnic groups unable to “define their own identity,” since identities are chosen for them by American society (255).

In *American Indian Stories* (1921) Zitkala-Ša discusses the “two-ness” she faces when interacting with a world in transition. Zitkala-Ša, a Sioux woman and early Indian author, captures life as a Native American child who leaves her native life behind to pursue an education from missionaries in the East. She is torn between two cultural identities—her native identity and her “white” identity. She writes, “Even nature seemed to have no place for me. I was neither a wee girl nor a tall one; neither a wild Indian nor a tame one” (69). The protagonist experiences double consciousness, but when she feels alienated from the native world and the “white man’s world,” she begins to occupy a “third world” in which she signals the inadequacy of “double consciousness.”

Zitkala-Ša’s *American Indian Stories* was published in 1921, eighteen years after W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* appeared. Her collected works of autobiographical tales and shorts stories, based on her own family traditions, demonstrate

the “double consciousness” that Du Bois proposed earlier. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois explains, “The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost” (2-3). Zitkala-Ša’s *American Indian Stories* demonstrates this construction of the self as it applies to the Native American identity. Zitkala-Ša’s *American Indian Stories* show the ways in which double consciousness affects the protagonist as she struggles to attain a sense of selfhood.

In *American Indian Stories*, young Zitkala-Ša is taken away from her family and brought to a boarding school partially funded by the United States federal government. In the introduction to *Boarding School Blues*, Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Siquoc describe the boarding schools as a “successful failure” developed by “Non-Indian policy makers and administrators” (1-3). Captain Richard Henry Pratt established the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, with the financial assistance of the federal government. The goal of the boarding schools was to place Native American children into an educational system that would guide them in assimilating into white society: “Pratt planned to destroy what he termed ‘savage languages,’ ‘primitive superstitions,’ and ‘uncivilized cultures,’ replacing them with work ethics, Christian values, and the white man’s civilization” (13).

Native Americans were forced to adjust to a new environment in order to fit America’s vision of civilization. The first step in this transformation was to seize the children’s possessions and alter their physical appearances by cutting their long hair. School officials even provided the students with new “white” names. The institutions followed a rigid military setup that included school uniforms, communication through military terminology, strict daily schedules, and marching through the hallways. Despite the language barrier between the teachers and the students, the children were educated in English. This barrier led to resistance from the Native American children. Despite their greatest efforts, the institutions were unable to strip them of their native identities:

School officials attempted to peel away layers of Indian identity, working from the outside into the hearts and minds of Native American children. The outward transformation occurred immediately as Indian children lost their clothing and hair, but the inner deconstruction of Indian identity proved a much more complicated task, often impossible. (Trafzer et al. 17)

Zitkala-Ša provides a firsthand account of the fragmented identity Native American children faced during this attempted integration.

Zitkala-Ša's childhood as a young Dakota girl growing up on an Indian reservation is documented in the first half of *American Indian Stories*. When her older brother returns from a three year education in the Northeast, Zitkala-Ša decides that she wants to receive an education in the East as well. Her mother is initially reluctant to subject her daughter to "the white man's lies" (23). In "'The Ears of the Palefaces Could Not Hear Me': Languages of Self-Representation in Zitkala-Ša's Autobiographical Essays," Mary Paniccia Carden argues that Zitkala-Ša uses her mother's voice to condemn the white intrusion. Carden points out the mother's suggestion that "white education is among the factors eroding the ground of 'real Dakota' identity" (130). It is the mother that instills the fear of the white man in both her children and the reader. Her mother advises her, "Don't believe a word they say! Their words are sweet, my child, their deeds are bitter" (Zitkala-Ša 23). Despite her reticence, she understands that her daughter needs an education. She considers this opportunity long overdue as compensation for the injustices the Native Americans have faced because of the whites. She fears that her daughter will become a tool in the white man's "experiment" (25). It is the relationship between the mother and daughter that reflects the double consciousness Zitkala-Ša experiences. As Carden argues, "Her distance from her mother is the measure of her distance from her young Sioux self; her immersion in American culture estranges her from the Sioux culture embodied by her mother and evacuates mother-daughter communication" (Carden 131). Zitkala-Ša's awareness of the two worlds she is split between deepens through her interaction with her Native mother.

Zitkala-Ša's interaction with the white world at the boarding school deepens the awareness of her double consciousness as well. Upon leaving her home on the reservation and traveling to the boarding school in the East, Zitkala-Ša immediately experiences a conflicted identity: "I was in the hands of strangers whom my mother did not fully trust. I no longer felt free to be myself, or to voice my own feelings" (25). She already recognizes a change in herself. Even the train ride on the way to the school proves to be a discouraging experience. The children of the "palefaces" stare at her, while pointing at her moccasins. This behavior is unacceptable in the Native American world, and makes the protagonist extremely uncomfortable. Once she arrives at the school, the social atmosphere is emotionally draining for the young girl. A paleface woman tosses her in the air. She is shocked by this interaction, commenting that her mother would never treat her like a "plaything" (30). Sandra Kumamoto Stanley evaluates the effect the conflicting cultures have on the young girl's character: "Imposing one set of values and erasing another, the missionaries impose a whole system of signification which the child Zitkala-Ša cannot decode and, as such, one in which she cannot situate the self" (67). Many aspects of the white world leave her confused and frustrated.

When the missionaries cut her hair, she is humiliated and saddened. She exclaims, "Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards!" (33). She cannot understand why they are cutting her hair, nor do they bother to explain their intentions. Zitkala-Ša is forced to erase a part of herself in order to gain acceptance in the dominant culture.

After attempting to transform her outer self, the missionaries move on to her inner self. She is forced to learn the white man's language and is able to speak only broken English within a year. However, her comprehension of the English language triggers resistance as well: "As soon as I comprehended a part of what was said and done, a mischievous spirit of revenge possessed me" (36). Her Dakota self and her "white" self are never far from each other. Her time spent at school leaves her seeing-sawing between conformity and rebellion. Young Zitkala-Ša is aware of the effect the education has on her: "It was next to impossible to leave the iron routine after the civilizing machine had once begun its day's buzzing; and as it was inbred in me to suffer in silence rather than to appeal to the ears of one whose open eyes could not see my pain, I have many times trudged in the day's harness heavy-footed, like a dumb sick brute" (41). Her fluctuation between her native self and the "white" self being imposed upon her leaves her torn between two identities. Carden argues, "Taken in hand as an object, she experiences the dissolution of the boundaries marking her sense of individuality. She loses control of the signifiers of identity inscribed on her body as she is surveyed, marked, and forced to comply with white cultural norms" (130). As Du Bois' description of double consciousness suggests, by conforming to the expectations of white society, she is divided into two different selves.

Her suspension between two worlds continues when she returns home to the reservation after spending three years at boarding school. The teenage Zitkala-Ša feels alienated from her mother, who is unable to console her educated daughter. She writes, "Even nature seemed to have no place for me. I was neither a wee girl nor a tall one; neither a wild Indian nor a tame one" (42). She discovers that she doesn't feel like she belongs in either world. She rebels against the act of assimilation, exclaiming, "I will not submit! I will struggle first" (33). Her inability to fit in either world leaves her feeling alienated. Stanley suggests,

She must face the fact that she is a representative of both—the ethnographic self and the radical other... Zitkala-Ša's work escapes the easy binary opposition in which the self is pitted against the other, the minority voice against the dominant culture. For finally, the self is a site of continual displacement, in which multiple voices must interrogate cultural presuppositions. (67)

This suggests that, although *American Indian Stories* reflects “double consciousness” in many ways, Zitkala-Ša’s identity is more fragmented than the binary theory proposes.

The protagonist’s shifting identity is enhanced during her adult years. Zitkala-Ša eventually becomes a teacher at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, founded by Captain Richard Henry Pratt. Her position at the school continues her integration into the white world. She confesses, “I made no friends among the race of people I loathed. Like a slender tree, I had been uprooted from my mother, nature, and God... Now a cold bare pole I seemed to be, planted in a strange earth” (62). She reminds her readers of the difficulties of erasing the Indian identity that Trafzer, Keller, and Siquoc spoke of in *Boarding School Blues*. Despite her residency in the white world, her native roots are still intact. Stanley analyzes the “double veil” that Zitkala-Ša wears as a Native American and an “assimilated” American:

Her sense of private dislocation is now transferred onto the communal sphere; for her Native American community also exists in the “in-between” space of a hybrid culture, caught in the “double veil” of being Yankton Sioux and enculturated Americans. But in this cultural site of contestation and negotiation, Zitkala-Ša, in mastering, rather than rejecting the “white man’s” discourse, acts as an agent for political and social change. Thus, her sense of her cultural dislocation gives her the opportunity for relocating and reconceiving cultural identity. (Stanley 68)

Through her fragmented identity, she embraces her cultural hybridity. Zitkala-Ša serves as an “intermediary” between the “white and Sioux cultures” (Carden 127). She is bound to both cultures, but remains loyal to her native identity. Her experiences with the white world produce feelings of pride and appreciation toward her Native American background. She refuses to disappear into white society, as assimilation demands of her. Instead, she uses her occupancy between two cultures to challenge the boundaries of cultural identity.

While both W.E.B. Du Bois and Zitkala-Ša experienced the ambiguity of racial identity during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Zitkala-Ša’s *American Indian Stories* already began to challenge the binary notion of double consciousness. Her attempt “to merge [her] double self into a better and truer self” supports Du Bois’ theory in many ways, but it also demonstrates the complexity of race and the difficulties of breaking it down into distinct categories (Du Bois 2-3). Zitkala-Ša uses her experiences of double consciousness to expose the identity politics present in America and to initiate change. Her inability to allow the process of assimilation to erase her native self only strengthens the feelings of displacement that she possesses.

Rather than giving in to society’s ideal of possessing only one identity, she accepts her multiple selves and rejects white society’s attempt to mold her into its own vision of civilization. Zitkala-Ša develops a “better and truer self” in true Du Boisian style.

It is important to trace the patterns in race-thinking over time, in order to understand the ways race-thinking has changed. By exploring the fragmentation of identity through literature, readers will realize that the color line is blurred, rather than divided into two distinct categories. Society has developed a more complex understanding of race and ethnicity over the past 100 years, and the beginning of this understanding is demonstrated in Zitkala-Ša’s *American Indian Stories*. The significance of this development is to pay homage to different races and ethnicities, just as Zitkala-Ša paid homage to W.E.B. Du Bois.

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